



Denver Post

Cash coming to clean up toxic homes

EPA targets tainted soil of N. Denver properties

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Thursday, July 17, 2003 - Cleanup of dangerous levels of arsenic and lead from the lawns of 141 homes in five Denver neighborhoods got some long-awaited help from the federal government Wednesday.

Officials announced they will receive a \$3.5 million grant for cleanup. The grant is part of a \$49 million plan to jump-start cleanups of 10 Superfund toxic waste sites in nine states. The Environmental Protection Agency said it would use the money in Denver to remove pollutants from residential properties in Clayton, Cole, Elyria, Swansea and southwest Globeville.

"It's a beginning," said City Councilwoman Debbie Ortega, who represents the area. She added that overall cost estimates for decontamination of roughly 850 homes in the neighborhoods around Interstate 70 and Vasquez Boulevard are nearly \$32 million.

The EPA found the neighborhoods to be contaminated in 1998. The agency placed the area - a mix of residential and commercial properties in the shadow of the ASARCO Inc. metals extraction plant - on its national priority list in 1999, making it eligible for Superfund money.

ASARCO settled a lawsuit in the early '90s and agreed to pay for cleanup of lead and arsenic contamination.

But further soil tests following the cleanup found a wider area of toxic waste. ASARCO argued that it may not be responsible for the wider spread of the dangerous metals, because other smelters had existed in the vicinity.

Rather than spend time investigating who is at fault for the pollution, the EPA has decided to act now and remove the metals with federal money.

The agency wants to immediately clean 141 properties that have lead levels of more than 540 parts per million and arsenic levels of more than 240 parts per million, said Victor Ketellapper, the EPA's manager for the remediation project.

"We will remove the top 12 inches, replace the soil and restore the yard as best as possible," Ketellapper said.

Exposure to the metals can cause cancers and damage to the central nervous system, reproductive system, kidneys and digestive tract. Health officials found about 9 percent of tested children in the area had dangerously elevated blood levels of lead, compared to 3 percent statewide.

Globeville resident Joan Hooker has been involved in screening children for lead contamination and has attended EPA meetings in her neighborhood since 1999. She said Wednesday that cleanup is more than needed.

"I think we have too many retarded children and children with special needs in northeast Denver, and I think it is because of the lead," Hooker said.

The 72-year cancer survivor blames the loss of her husband, at 57, to the pollutants. She blames what she considers increased poor health in the area on the contamination.

She believes it took the federal government so long to respond because the affected neighborhoods are primarily working-class and underprivileged.

"Park Hill? It would've been done," she said. "Definitely."

Denver-area U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette, who lobbied for federal funds, agreed the funds have been a long time coming.

"This represents a very important step in removing toxins from neighborhoods that have for too long been ignored," DeGette said in a statement. "No one in the Denver metro area should have to live with elevated levels of heavy metals in their yards."

Marianne L. Horinko, EPA's acting administrator, told the Associated Press that the primary factor in choosing Denver and the other nine sites was the relative health risks posed by each site. Money for the cleanups comes from both Congress and what the agency can collect from polluters.

"There's not enough money to start everything we want this year," said Horinko, who before taking over as temporary head of EPA this week oversaw the agency's Superfund program. "You need to prioritize based on risks to human health and the environment."

Julie Wolk, an environmental health advocate for U.S. Public Interest Research Group, said the number of new cleanups beginning this year "is pathetically low."

"The Bush administration's vast underfunding of the Superfund program unacceptably puts more and more Americans at risk of toxic exposures in their own communities," she said.

Denver Post Staff Writer Theo Stein and Associated Press contributed to this report.

